The style files

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Clarify this

This second note in a series to encourage better writing advises us all to use the pronoun 'this' unambiguously. Too often 'this' is open to misinterpretation. Such misinterpretation hinders effective communication.

As with much of the advice I will describe, this clarification is a small gain. But good writing is composed of making many such small improvements.

Tone is important, and tone consists entirely of making these tiny, tiny choices. If you make enough of them wrong ... then you won't get your maximum readership. The reader who has to read the stuff will go on reading it, but with less attention, less commitment than you want. (Van Leunen)

The word "this" is frequently ambiguous

The word 'this' refers to something just mentioned; but what? You know, but the reader probably will not. Ensure that your use of "this" is absolutely clear and unambiguous. Often simply insert an appropriate noun after the 'this' [1, §4.7].

The following examples illustrate the problem and a remedy. All alternatives in the parentheses are potentially possible.

Ambiguous: In 6 out of 15 contests, the shadower appeared stationary to the other insect. This makes the insects hard to spot.

Clearer: This (contest | shadowing) makes the insects hard to spot.

Ambiguous: The disadvantage of this approach is that there may not be enough data at each time point. We overcome this by using a smoothed covariance or correlation matrix.

Clearer: We overcome this (disadvantage | lack of data) by using a smoothed covariance or correlation matrix.

Ambiguous: A correction factor can be applied and this brings the M-functional very close to the quantiles of the original distribution.

Clearer: A correction factor can be applied and this (correction | application) brings the M-functional very close to the quantiles of the original distribution.

The pronoun "this" is the most dangerous of all ... because it is potentially the most ambiguous. It might or might not refer to the thing last denoted by a noun. It might refer to the whole of the last page or even to the whole of the next page. The cure, very often, is to replace the pronoun by lucid repetition of a noun or noun phrase. (Michael McIntyre)

Other pronouns frequently require clarification

such as 'these', 'those', 'it', 'its', 'they' and 'their'. The following example illustrates the clarification.

Ambiguous: We introduce and explore an approximate regression quantiles method. It is based on a new interpretation of M-functionals.

Clearer: We introduce and explore an approximate regression quantiles method. The (introduction | exploration | method) is based on a new interpretation of M-functionals.

Ambiguous: Various state-of-the-art spatial and temporal discretisation methods employed to solve Maxwell equations on multi-dimensional structured grid networks are investigated and the dispersive and dissipative errors inherent in those examined.

Clearer: Various state-of-the-art spatial and temporal discretisation methods employed to solve Maxwell equations on multi-dimensional structured grid networks are investigated and the dispersive and dissipative errors inherent in those (methods | grids | equations) examined.

Summary:

How many times have you read a Reviewer's comments and wondered how the Reviewer could possibly have misunderstood you that way? I suspect a lot of times. I know I despair of Reviewers many times. Yet often the Reviewer has misunderstood you because you have allowed him/her to misunderstand. Work with Reviewers to eliminate such misunderstandings. *Clarify your pronouns, especially 'this'.*

One should not aim at being possible to understand, but at being impossible to misunderstand. (Quintillion)

References

[1] N.J. Higham, *Handbook of writing for the mathematical sciences*, 2nd edn (SIAM 1988).

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