

Helpful Hints for Technical Writing

Misuse of "Occur"

The verb "occur" is useful to tell such things as when or where some incident took place.

Examples of the proper use of occur are:

- The accident occurred two miles north of town.
- The last major earthquake occurred in 1962.
- An eclipse of the moon occurred Thursday night.
- The explosion occurred in the solvent storage room.



Verbs are words of action that describe some activity of the subject of the sentence. A noun representing the action of any verb can be formed by adding "ing" to the verb. Each of these nouns is an "occurrence," and can form a sentence with the verb "occur." For example: Walking occurred. Spraying occurred. Falling occurred. Absorbing occurred. Germinating occurred. Breaking occurred, etc.

From some verbs, nouns have also been formed by means other than adding "ing," while other verbs can become nouns without being changed at all. All of these nouns represent the action of the verb. Each one is an "occurrence," and can form a sentence with the verb "occur." For example: Absorption occurs. Germination occurs. The fall occurred. The break occurred. A struggle occurs, etc.

Unfortunately, the fact that every verb can be converted to a noun that "occurs," lets writers fall into a lazy writing pattern in which verbs are changed to nouns and "occur" is over-used. As a consequence, excess words are used, the amount of information presented may be reduced, expression is not direct and forceful, and what is written is harder to read than it should be.

Examples of sentences where "occur" is misused and how such sentences can be improved:

- Poor:** Absorption of the herbicide occurred.
- Better:** The herbicide was absorbed.
- Poor:** A break in the levee occurred.
- Better:** The levee broke.
- Poor:** Control of the weed occurred as a result of applying the herbicide.
- Better:** The herbicide controlled the weed.
- Poor:** Drying of the soil occurred in 12 hours.
- Better:** The soil dried in 12 hours.
- Poor:** A reduction in yield did not occur.
- Better:** Yield was not reduced.

All of these poor sentences are grammatically correct; they are not ambiguous; they can be understood. But they each represent two major problems. 1. The poor versions always have more words than the improved versions. This alone is reason enough to avoid them. 2. The poor versions are sluggish and lack force because the most powerful part of the sentence, the verb, has been changed to a noun, and they very drab verb "occur" has been used to complete the sentence.

"Occur" is often to blame for the problem of presenting less information than a given number of words could present.

For example:

- Poor:** Germination occurred at 25 C.
- Better:** Seeds germinated at 25 C.
- Poor:** A fire occurred.
- Better:** The building burned.
- Poor:** Incorporation occurred after spraying.
- Better:** Trifluralin was incorporated after spraying.
- Poor:** Death occurred in 7 days.
- Better:** The plants died in 7 days.

In these sentences, both versions use about the same number of words, but the better version eliminated the word "occur" and presents additional information in its place.

Although "occur" can be used effectively, it is usually used ineffectively in the technical literature. Therefore, in reviewing your own manuscripts, and those of other authors, finding "occur" should always be a signal that you may have found a place where the manuscript can be improved.

Remember:

- Your readers all
- should be annoyed,
- If "occur" you have
- too much employed.

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