

Nerd Words



There is one thing I like about most undergraduate papers: you can certainly tell the student was trying when s/he wrote it. Unfortunately, many of these students tried far too hard—and more often tried too hard at sounding like ‘academics’ rather than tried too hard on the content. No matter your high school preparation, you are still just beginning to learn to write in a style appropriate for the social sciences and at a level appropriate for university work. It’s not just you: most people, about 85% or so, are also in the same position and must learn to adjust their writing styles as well. As I often tell students, “fight the urge” to use pompous writing, large words, and enormous sentences. Papers are a place for you to demonstrate your understanding of the material and your ability to communicate in a written form—they are not a place for you to demonstrate your large vocabulary, grammatical gymnastics competence, skill at locating obscure facts and musty sources, or ability to manipulate margins and font sizes.

A critical component of many of the problem papers I see is the set of expressions I call the ‘nerd words.’ These are terms that often get dropped into sentences in an effort to sound “more academic.” What the undergraduates don’t realize, though, is that they’re using these words four or five times more frequently than most scholars. Even worse, almost all nerd words in undergraduate papers can be eliminated from the sentence *without changing its meaning at all*. In other words, they are totally unnecessary. To avoid this, I set a quota for my students (and often myself!) of normally one nerd word per 200-250 words of paper. This is about 1-2 per page, or one every paragraph or so. Even then, I tend to go back through and make sure that every single one is absolutely necessary to making my point.

You will notice that a lot of these words are conjunctive—connector words or terms that let you establish relationships between words and clauses. This is deliberate. Another prominent concern for the problem papers is the ‘everlasting sentence,’ which runs on for ages at a time. (I once received a paper with a one-sentence paragraph that took up eight typed lines.) By limiting your use of conjunctive expressions, you will force your writing—and your thinking—into a more linear form, which will help your argument stand out much more clearly. You can make the same connections between the words and the thoughts, using things like verb and modifier choice instead of adverbial clauses.

The Nerd Words

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|--------------------|------------------|----------------|----------------------|
| such that | thus | however | in/with regard(s) to |
| due to | therefore | necessitate(d) | utilize(d) |
| in accordance with | thereby, whereby | aforementioned | desire(d) |
| likewise | t/herein | furthermore | w/hence |
| moreover | whereas | consequently | given |
| arise (and forms) | as to | | |