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Bright idea to improve prose but remain accurate

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Sir

I agree with Cheryl Strauss ('Increasing prose quality by decreasing repetition' [Nature 446, 725; doi:10.1038/446725c 2007](#)) that it would be pleasing to find trimmer descriptions in the scientific literature. It is tempting to blame overuse of words such as 'increase' and 'decrease' on a linguistically repressive science culture.

Nevertheless, scientific communication aims to record information explicitly, leaving nothing to contextual interpretation, so that experiments may be repeated and verified. Unconventional description has the dual danger of being imprecise or too specific.

Take, for example, the suggestion of replacing 'increased' with 'brighter' or 'more intense' to qualify the word 'fluorescence'. All three expressions have explicit, exclusive definitions. 'Increased' fluorescence means that the number of photons emitted due to absorption of smaller-wavelength photons is larger than it was. If a sample is 'brighter', the luminous flux per unit area per unit solid angle has increased, scaled for human visual receptors. And if a sample is 'more intense', it might be fluorescing at the same rate into a smaller area. A scientist reading the article might make an incorrect assumption if the wrong qualifier is used. We must ensure that editing preserves precise scientific meanings.

I agree, though, that 'shorter mouse tails' is an improvement on 'mouse tails of decreased length' – no one is likely to assume they were shorter in time!

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