In Terms of *in terms of*

might have called this article “About *in terms of*” or “The Case Against *in terms of*” or (more dramatically) “Down with *in terms of*.” By using the first *in terms of* instead of a clearer, more common connector, I obscured the meaning—and that is my point.

There’s a verbal plague loose in the land, a contagion so strong that it seems unstoppable. So far, it has afflicted American speech more than American writing. Just listen to what you hear on talk shows, in meetings, in courtrooms, in everyday conversation. Everything is *in terms of* this and *in terms of* that. *In terms of* ad nauseam.

In an earlier column, I said that another wordy phrase—*prior to*—“takes the booby prize for the most common inflated phrase in legal and official writing.” In speech, though, *in terms of* has run away with that distinction.

Both phrases belong to a grammatical category of prepositions consisting of more than one word—variously called compound or complex or phrasal prepositions. In another earlier column, I offered a list of compound prepositions with their shorter and simpler equivalents. Fowler said compound prepositions are “almost the worst element in modern English, stuffing up what is written with a compost of nouny abstractions.” And the trouble with many compound prepositions (like *in terms of*) is not just that they waste words. They also tend to obscure logical relationships, to muddy the connection between ideas.

Here is what a few leading authorities have said about *in terms of* and its ilk:

- *In terms of* is often indefensibly verbose. Whenever you can replace it with a simple preposition, do so. . . . —Bryan A. Garner, *A Dictionary of Modern American Usage*.
- *In terms of* is a piece of padding usually best omitted. —Strunk & White, *The Elements of Style*.
- Much present-day writing is peppered with the phrase *in terms of*, probably because it has a fine, learned sound. But often it is all sound, signifying nothing. The phrase, properly used, signals a translation from one kind of language to another. —Theodore M. Bernstein, _The Careful Writer_.
- In all utility writing today, official and commercial, the simple prepositions we have in such abundance tend to be forgotten and replaced by groups of words more imposing perhaps, but often less precise. —Sir Ernest Gowers, _The Complete Plain Words_.
- A Dictionary of Modern American Usage.
Everything is in terms of this and in terms of that. In terms of ad nauseam.

- Do you think the food will make a difference in terms of how the Afghan people respond? (radio host)
- I would be very cautious in terms of drawing long-term conclusions. (economic analyst)
- There has been collateral damage in terms of postal workers. (radio commentator)
- This was the only purchase I made in terms of appliances. (home decorator)
- The Patriot Act is an extremely dangerous law in terms of the very expansive definition of “terrorism.” (immigration lawyer)
- When you’re unsuccessful in terms of winning, you always look for things to adjust. (basketball coach)

Although we can, of course, make some allowances for speech, in terms of has become a bad habit. In the examples above, notice how often it functions as a loose, all-purpose coupler, one that seems to introduce a tacked-on idea.

Down with in terms of.

FOOTNOTES

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