

In Terms of *in terms of*

I 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.”¹ 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.² I noted that the great H.W. Fowler said compound prepositions are “almost the worst element in modern English, stuffing up what is written with a compost of nouny abstractions.”³ 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*.

About a year ago, during several weeks, I collected some examples that I happened to hear or read. These are not all the examples I ran into during that time—just the ones that I remembered to jot down:

- Since May, we have been dry in terms of rain [we haven’t had any? much? rain]. (weather announcer)
- The writer had a complete understanding of ~~the case in terms of~~ the facts and the applicable law. (judge)
- I’ve been away so long, I’m behind in terms of [on] culture. (radio caller)
- Do we know anything about X in terms of his background [about X’s background]? (radio commentator)
- After 70 years, a little structural problem on the best house ever designed doesn’t strike me as something that raises any kind of revisionist issues in terms of [about] Mr. Wright’s career. (college professor)
- We can still make progress in terms of [on] racism. (conference representative)

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- We’re trying to take Luther’s game and expand it a bit, especially in ~~terms of~~ how he rushes the quarterback. (football coach)
- I can’t tell you the timetable in terms of [for] opening up this issue. (radio psychologist)
- Fundamentals in terms of [such as? especially?] earnings remain weak. (financial adviser)
- Our emphasis will be more in terms of [on] prevention. (health official)
- Strategic Income Fund gives me more flexibility in ~~terms of~~ trading. (financial adviser)
- We will give the President what he wants, in ~~terms of~~ both resources and authorization. (political leader)
- Housing starts, a key indicator ~~in terms of~~ the housing market, were down 7 percent. (financial commentator)
- Afghanistan is basically destroyed in terms of [by the?] fighting. (radio commentator)
- Intercollegiate athletics is great in terms of [for] engendering spirit. (football coach)
- We’re trying to paint a picture that’s black and white in terms of [about?] good and evil. (radio caller)
- You ought to read David McCullough’s book in terms of [about? before?] embarking on a presidency. (TV host)
- We’ve heard stories ~~in terms of~~ how prepared the terrorists were. (television commentator)
- There are so many variables at play regarding departures (of visitors) that it creates problems in ~~terms of~~ monitoring people. (government official)
- The trail has run a little cold in the United States in terms of active participants. [The trail of active participants in the United States has run a little cold.] (television commentator)
- I have some information that I think would be helpful to them in ~~terms of~~ running the city. (public official)

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 [about] drawing long-term conclusions. (economic analyst)
 - There has been collateral damage in terms of [to?] postal workers. (radio commentator)
 - This was the only purchase I made in terms of appliances. [This was the only appliance I bought.] (home decorator)
 - The Patriot Act is an extremely dangerous law in terms of [because of] the very expansive definition of “terrorism.” (immigration lawyer)
 - When you’re unsuccessful in terms of winning [When you’re not 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*. ♦



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FOOTNOTES

1. *A Modest Wish List for Legal Writing*, 79 Mich. B.J. 1574, 1577 (2000).
2. *Plain Words* (Part 2), Mich. B.J., Sept. 2001, at 72, 72.
3. H.W. Fowler, *A Dictionary of Modern English Usage* 102 (Sir Ernest Gowers ed., 2d ed. 1965).

