

How to Use Polysyllabic Words*

Technical writings rely on the extensive use of polysyllabic words. Such words contain in the strict sense more than three syllables and the number of syllables increases whenever further classification of complex phenomena is needed. Taxonomy, in particular, deals with quite long polysyllabic words. Use of specific terminology appears to be quite convenient for small groups of scholars specializing within narrow fields. However, rarely used words if not properly explained could deter the broad audience from grasping the proposed ideas and evaluating the work done. In some academic circles, scholars may state that the ones who do not understand their manuscripts should learn more to reach supposedly higher levels of understanding on the subject matter. Such a statement is exaggerated and demonstrates elitist attempts to disguise certain topics as being complex and difficult to grasp by the average reader. In most cases, there are proper ways to explain in simple terms even the most complicated studies. Nevertheless, the construction of new technical words with the addition of prefixes and suffixes as well as concatenation and modification of the roots of words is a common practice. Some examples of polysyllabic adjectives, nouns, and verbs are given below:

arbitrary, beneficial, computational, experimental, numerical, professional, theoretical;
analysis, development, festivity, measurement, taxonomy, tetrahedron, terminology;
appreciate, disseminate, elaborate, investigate, manipulate, participate, visualize, etc.

Polysyllabic words can be formed as a result of concatenation of monosyllabic, disyllabic, or trisyllabic ones:

electromagnetism, nevertheless, readability, spectrophotometer.

Addition of selected prefixes/suffixes increases the number of syllables and the complexity of the words thus formed. The construction of antonym pairs by adding prefixes is one private case:

compensated – uncompensated, continuous – discontinuous, conventional – unconventional,
deterministic – nondeterministic, multiplexing – demultiplexing, understanding –
misunderstanding.

Polysyllabic technical terms often contain parts originating from other languages such as Latin, French, etc.:

architecture, biotechnology, engineering, management, mathematics, philosophy, technology;
approximation, calculation, characterization, classification, concatenation, concentration,
derivation, differentiation, estimation, evaluation, immunization, information, integration,
preservation, regularization, telecommunications, transportation, verification.

The longest technical word included in standard dictionaries is 45-letter word containing 13 syllables:

pneumonoultramicroscopicsilicovolcanoconiosis,

which is just another word for silicosis.

When counting the number of syllables in a word, the letter Y is often a vowel or diphthong in syllables, as in

gyroscope, hysteresis, polysyllabic, psychology.

The addition of prefixes/suffixes for an intended meaning must be performed with a good understanding of basic rules being kept in creating polysyllabic words, for instance:

incomprehensible, incomprehensibly, incomprehensibility, incomprehensibleness, etc.

Otherwise, a choice of a polysyllabic construction proves incorrect, such as

~~uncomprehendable~~.

The spelling in parts (SIP) is a phonics technique allowing the division of polysyllabic terms into separate parts which assists the decoding process of the individual parts. Using sample texts as a reference, two indirect measures of the complexity of academic texts are the average number of syllables per word and the average number of words per sentence.

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The systematic representation of the growing body of knowledge challenges established traditions in technical writing. Technical form and content evolve dynamically to describe large information structures. Advanced theoretical, experimental, and computational findings must be expressed in words and the complexity of discussed topics requires the frequent inclusion of specific polysyllabic words which are conveniently composed to allow more flexible textual adjustments.

Brevity is greatly appreciated in technical writing but detailed description of important topics is also needed. These two approaches contradict each other which can be viewed in terms of the precision level chosen by the authors to convey their findings to readers. According to the type of a manuscript, the depth of presentation can be varied which depends on the literary skills of the authors.

Regular research papers should have a clear description of the main ideas and sufficient details to allow proper verification of the reported results. The citations of selected references ease the reading of the text and provide links to related works.

Review articles initiate comprehensive discussions on chosen topics with the inclusion of long paragraphs with compiled information from cited sources so that both comparison and in-depth analysis of known results could be carried out.

Technical reports discuss developmental issues which require thorough presentation of performed measurements, test results, and design considerations. The emphasis is on the applied aspects of the work and the technicalities are given in detail.

An analogy with the amplification properties of an optical instrument comes to mind. As greater the optical resolution, as more details become visible. A polysyllabic word is a specific pattern of distinct parts which are concatenated to describe precisely a complex term but this may also narrow the scope of the discussion. The balanced use of polysyllabic words of different lengths can be considered as a way to control both the complexity of the text and the depth of presentation where necessary.

A single sentence often contains several polysyllabic words. However, if the majority of technical terms are polysyllabic, the sentence must be well written to allow only one interpretation of the textual content. Multiple polysyllabic adjectives to a noun are acceptable in some sentences, where the alternative ways of placing the said adjectives one after another may convey different meanings.

Technical texts have internal dynamics which becomes noticeable with the use of active voice and the reduction of the number of polysyllabic words. Abbreviations (acronyms) further reduce the sentence length. It is a common practice to introduce a long polysyllabic term only once and its consequent inclusion in the remaining paragraphs to be made with acronyms, special symbols or shorter synonyms.

The growth of the number of polysyllabic technical terms in circulation is attributed to the rapid expansion and merger of technical disciplines. Single terms originally associated with distinct fields of study become used in multiple private cases or mixed with other terms following to the modification of the original words with the addition of prefixes and suffixes or mere concatenation of words. Speculative mergers of parts from different words are also observed which results in the creation of hybrid technical words.

Polysyllabic words which are frequently included in the majority of technical publications are familiar to most readers. For more complex or rarely used words, brief discussion could prove beneficial if the meaning of such words is not self-explanatory. Although for some authors the main priority could be the timely delivery of information, the good writing style remains an essential requirement for the acceptance of an academic work and its positive impact on the studies of other scholars.