

# Editor's Craft

---

## There Is, Is There?

Given the frequency with which I must correct real solecisms such as split infinitives and dangling modifiers, it may seem silly to harp on a structure that is grammatically sound. Whether books or journal articles, manuscripts are unusual if they do not contain a plethora of sentences and phrases beginning with a combination of "there" and a form of the verb "to be." This construction saturates our conversation as well as the less imaginative products of our written language. It is employed so pervasively by professionals in today's electronic and print media that it is not surprising that it is used as a matter of course by those whose primary focus is in areas other than writing. Because we hear it and read it so much, "there is (was, were, etc.)" has deadened our abilities to describe and depict, just as a pile driver operating in the immediate vicinity renders us unable to hear. Pernicious ubiquity makes us senseless.

As I said, "there is" is correct; however, after it has appeared several times in a few paragraphs, readers well may wonder wearily why the author did not simply set forth the data in a numbered list. In addition, this phraseology frequently uses more words than are necessary. Examples abound; the following are not direct quotations but are representative.

"There are three ways in which this assay can be performed." Briefer by three words and just as informative is, "This assay can be performed in three ways." How about, "There are no data to support these findings," as opposed to, "No data support these findings." Rewriting, "There is a significant number of studies being carried out in this area," to read, "Significant numbers of studies in this area are under way," avoids the bugaboo; it also eliminates one of editing's knotty conundrums: whether the verb should agree with number ("is") or with studies ("are").

Certainly, the phrase need not be deleted every time it appears. In many cases it is the simplest, most direct means of introducing a concept and letting it progress naturally. With heightened awareness, however, authors might be wary of the "there is" trap and instead, choose vocabulary that provides variety, if not inventive flair. It gives me pleasure to steal a march, as it were, on the less cognizant communicators by ensuring that what scientific or medical writings pass across my desk are cleansed of that dull, trite usage. Else what's an editor for?

**Sarah Jeffries**  
Associate Editor