



Uni-edit English Writing Tip 013

What's wrong with “the present study”?

Difficulty: Intermediate

Uni-edit English Editors are accustomed to seeing the self-referential phrase “the present study”, which an author uses in a paper to refer to itself or accompanying research. It's not a particularly technical term, nor is it subject-specific: it appears in the natural sciences and social sciences with equal frequency. Most Asian languages have a word with exactly this meaning: for example, 本研究 in both Chinese (*běnn yánjiū*) and Japanese (*hon-kenkyūu*), so it's easy for non-native speakers of English to translate directly from their native language.

However, English has several ways to refer to the present study. Are you confident that you have all of the options in your writer's toolbox already?

Using “the present study” correctly

The phrase “the present study” is most commonly encountered in a paper's purpose statement.

The present study investigated individual and environmental factors of adults with mental disorders, and their relationships with psychiatric medication compliance.

Another common construction is the prepositional phrase “in the present study”. In these cases, we recommend using first person or active voice to enhance clarity and conciseness, although passive voice is also possible.

In the present study, we investigated individual and environmental factors of adults with mental disorders, and their relationships with psychiatric medication compliance.

Individual and environmental factors of adults with mental disorders were investigated **in the present study**, as well as their relationships with psychiatric medication compliance.

In addition, the phrase “the current study” seems to be used less frequently than “the present study”, but it is exactly synonymous with it, and therefore you can use it in exactly the same ways.

The current study investigated individual and environmental factors of adults with mental disorders, and their relationships with psychiatric medication compliance.

Only using “the present study” is poor style

So why can't you just use “the present study” all the time? There is no grammatical problem with using “the present study” all the time, but there is a style problem. It is considered poor English style to use the same words and phrases over and over again: readers assume the author is repeating themselves because they have nothing new to say, or they lose focus or get bored or confused because they cannot distinguish the current information from identically worded previous information.

The two options below share two advantages. The first is conciseness. Each option below is shorter than “the present study”. In sections like the Abstract, where word counts are strict, using one of the options below is a simple way to save yourself one or two words at each instance.

The second advantage is reduction of markedness. Markedness is a broad linguistic concept, but in the context of vocabulary and reader comprehension, it means that commonly used words require less mental effort to read than uncommonly used words. Therefore, minimizing your use of unnecessarily complex phrases (i.e., phrases where simple phrases would also suffice) allows readers to focus their energy on understanding subject-matter-specific language, which is often necessarily complex.

Incidentally, saving space and reducing markedness are two of the main reasons for using acronyms. Which sentence is easier to read below: Sentence 1 or Sentence 2?

Sentence 1: Researchers from the United States of America are working on using clustered regularly interspaced short palindromic repeats technology to edit segments of deoxyribonucleic acid in an attempt to treat various heart conditions.

Sentence 2: Researchers from the USA are working on using CRISPR technology to edit segments of DNA in an attempt to treat various heart conditions.

Alternative 1: First person voice

First-person pronouns like “we” and “our” are very common, and so using them creates low markedness. It is usually obvious from phrases like “We found” and “Our results show” that you are referring to the present study.

The results of the present study demonstrate that female gender may predict lower continuation rates for rational emotive therapy.

Our results demonstrate that female gender may predict lower continuation rates for rational emotive therapy.

But there's a potential problem: What if you discuss the results of multiple studies you have authored? In this context, "our results" could refer to the results of the present study, or to the results of a previous study.

Common words can serve as a simple solution: "here" for the former case, and "previous" or "past" for the latter case.

In a **previous** study, we found that rational emotive therapy showed similar efficacy rates regardless of gender. However, our results **here** demonstrate that female gender may predict lower continuation rates for this treatment.

Alternative 2: "This study"

"This study" can generally be used in the same ways as "the present study". You don't need to learn different sentence patterns in order to use it naturally and correctly.

This study investigated individual and environmental factors of adults with mental disorders, and their relationships with psychiatric medication compliance.

Be careful, however, in paragraphs where you talk about or compare the results of multiple studies:

Our study's findings corroborate those of Smith et al. (2013), who found that antidepressant compliance depends on several environmental factors, such as living environment. However, **this study's** emphasis on one kind of medication means it remains unclear whether other types of medication show the same trend.

In this case, does the author mean "their study": i.e., Smith et al.'s focus on antidepressants only? Or does the author mean "the present study": i.e., our study's focus on one kind of medication? You can see that "this study" can create ambiguity when you mention multiple studies in the same paragraph.

Summary

The phrase “the present study” has a precise meaning, but it is rarely encountered outside of academic English. By using it, you can be sure that your meaning will be conveyed, but by using it exclusively, your writing will sound stiff, unnatural, and unconvincing.

The alternatives above should give you excellent opportunities to enhance your communication by utilizing more natural and common English words like “this” and “here”. By improving your command of their nuances in this single context, you will likewise improve your unconscious understanding of the implicit relationships and referents of these common words in all English media you read. Why not experiment in your next research paper? There’s no time like the present!

END OF TIP