

# Identifying Technical Language



Technical language can be very useful in conveying complex ideas to an audience with the appropriate background knowledge. But when communicating to a general audience, it is important to take a step back and consider your word choice carefully.

If you are writing technical information, it can be tempting to use the words that seem most precise and familiar to you, but for readers to understand what you are saying, you have to see the message from their point of view. Language that seems natural to you may be opaque and frustrating for readers. This is particularly true when the goal is to communicate something to readers in a field different from your own, or to the general public.

---

*Write to communicate effectively, not to tell all you know*

---

**Write to communicate effectively.** Effective communication should be catered to the intended audience, so ask these questions to decipher if you should use a word or phrase:

(Adapted from <https://sharingscience.agu.org/jargon-and-how-to-avoid-it/>)

## Who exactly is my audience?

- Field test your message with a member of this audience, if at all possible. If your readers are the general public, then think of the people in your neighborhood, your relatives, or your friends from high school. If they would struggle to understand what you're talking about, then rephrase your message.

## Do others know what the acronyms mean?

- Most fields have acronyms that people within that field understand. But to outsiders, these acronyms are probably just a jumble of letters. Recall the frustration you may have felt when trying to decipher unfamiliar acronyms. If you use an acronym, make sure that the members of your audience will understand it.

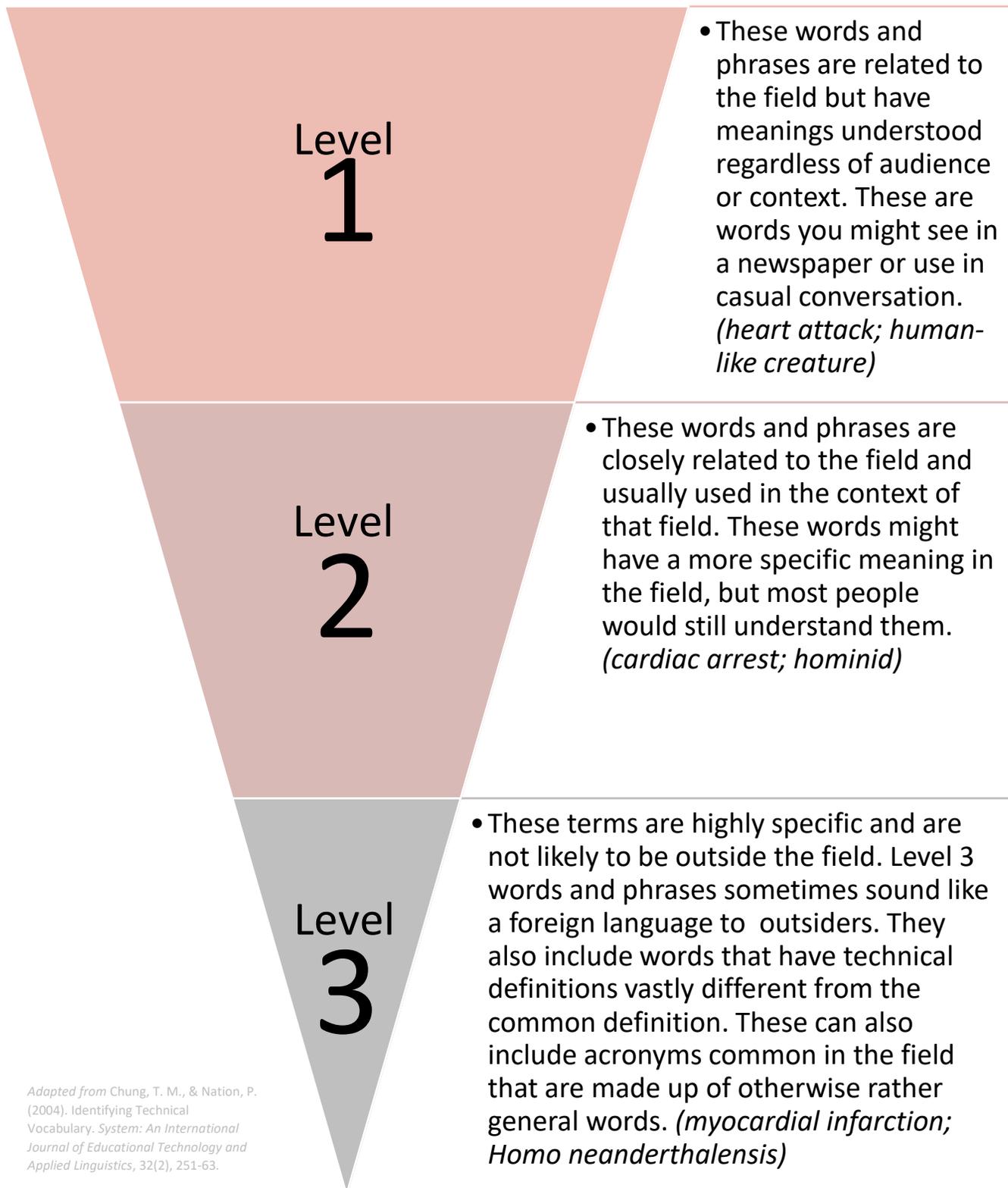
## Does this word have multiple meanings?

- Lots of technical terms have standard definitions outside their technical meanings. Using words like this can be very confusing because it's hard for outsiders to separate the technical from the general definition of a word. For example, a computer mouse is very different from the small rodent.

## How many syllables are in that word?

- Geomorphology? Six syllables. Hydrostatic equilibrium? Nine syllables. Long, complicated words in science and other technical fields can be necessary, but for whom? Not everyone wants or needs the same level of technical precision.

Another, more systematic approach to discerning technical language is to place words into specific categories. Linguists Chung and Nation (2004) developed a classification system for this. Using their work, we've developed our own way to decide how technical a word or phrase may be.



Adapted from Chung, T. M., & Nation, P. (2004). Identifying Technical Vocabulary. *System: An International Journal of Educational Technology and Applied Linguistics*, 32(2), 251-63.

This classification system can be useful, but keep in mind this is just a starting place. Two people may not classify the same technical terms the same way. Even within fields and disciplines, terms may have meanings that differ among people or organizations. Because technical terms can vary within and outside a given field, the most important thing is to **know your audience**.

The following table gives terms from several different fields. Each row describes the same concept in increasing levels of technicality. Notice that the column for Level 3 contains a single word or phrase, whereas the columns for Level 1 and 2 contain multiple words to describe the same idea expressed in Level 3. To communicate clearly and effectively with an outside audience, it is often necessary to use more words than you would with fellow insiders.

<i>Field</i>	<i>Level 1</i>	<i>Level 2</i>	<i>Level 3</i>
<i>Computer Science</i>	A list of people, places, or things that aren't allowed access to a specific network, website, email address, etc.	Access control mechanism that denies access to a list of blocked emails, IP addresses, users, URLs, etc.	Blacklist
	The "brain" of the computer that does all the calculations, so the computer can complete its tasks	Central processing unit	CPU
	The "short term memory" of the computer that stores information only while it is being used	Random access memory	RAM
<i>Biology</i>	When the body maintains its internal conditions on its own in a balanced manner	State of stable equilibrium of self-regulated processes	Homeostasis
	Cell that helps the skin and bones keep their structure	Cell that produces collagen and other fibers in connective tissue	Fibroblast
	Molecule controlling how much of a protein is made inside the cell	Protein controlling rate of transcription from DNA to RNA	Transcription factor
<i>Writing</i>	Who you're writing for and why	Audience, purpose, and message	Rhetorical situation
	Order of words in a sentence	Sentence structure	Syntax
	Being able to trust the source	Credibility	Ethos
<i>Psychology</i>	Dealing with painful feelings or experiences by ignoring them	A defense mechanism in which a person deems a memory or emotion as unacceptable and attempts to exclude it from his consciousness	Repression
	A person's sense of being able to see things how they really are and uses that information to meet the individual's needs	The part of a person's consciousness that tries to satisfy desires in accordance with reality and social norms	Ego
	Loss of interest in normal activities	Inability to feel pleasure	Anhedonia

