

# Abbreviations exclude readers in scientific communication, experts say

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The universal use of abbreviations in higher education is intended to simplify, but really they stifle scientific communication, according to Purdue University ostracism experts.

"Abbreviations are meant to be shortcuts, but they end up alienating people," says Kipling Williams, a professor of [social psychology](#) who has studied ostracism for more than 20 years. "It's not that people are trying to be exclusive. They just mistakenly assume other people know. We suggest it's better to err on the side that they don't know and avoid using [abbreviations](#), especially when writing and promoting research. This attempt to be efficient is more likely to make people feel excluded and ignored, much like we see in ostracism research, and this could hinder efforts in sharing scientific findings across disciplines and with the general public."

Williams, along with graduate student Andrew H. Hales and alumnus Joel Rector, wrote an article for the Association for Psychological Science's APS Observer, "Alienating the Audience: How Abbreviations Hamper Scientific Communication." Abbreviations can include acronyms or initialisms, such as DARPA, ANOVA and MPA, which are Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency, analysis of variance and Midwestern Psychological Association, respectively.

Another reason abbreviations are used is because they give insiders a cohesiveness, but at the expense of others. The Purdue researchers say there is an easy solution; don't use abbreviations.

"We know from ostracism research that seemingly trivial items can make [people](#) feel ignored and excluded," says Hales, a doctoral student in [psychological sciences](#). "For example, previous research has found that while Christmas displays may seem innocuous, to those who don't celebrate Christmas it is a reminder of outsider status. Or, when women were asked to read job descriptions for engineering positions, the ideal candidate was described using the male pronoun. By not using abbreviations and adding just a few extra syllables we can bring everyone in the loop."

**More information:** Alienating the Audience: How Abbreviations Hamper Scientific Communication. [www.psychologicalscience.org/onlineFirst/10.1177/0956797617701414](http://www.psychologicalscience.org/onlineFirst/10.1177/0956797617701414)

Provided by Purdue University

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