Here is another one of those terms too often thrown around loosely: “processed food.” It’s never used in a positive or even neutral way; it’s almost always meant negatively. It’s a weasel word.

I wondered what processed food really is. What does it mean? What makes processed food so bad? What exactly are these evil processes?

Wikipedia offers the following list of food processing methods:

Removal of unwanted outer layers, such as potato peeling or the skinning of peaches. Chopping or slicing e.g. diced carrots.

Mincing and macerating

Liquefaction, such as to produce fruit juice

Fermentation e.g. in beer breweries

Emulsification

Cooking, such as boiling, broiling, frying, steaming or grilling

Deep frying

Baking

Mixing

Addition of gas such as air entrainment for bread or gasification of soft drinks

Proofing

Spray drying

Pasteurization

Packaging

Basically, it means prepared, cooked, or packaged. With the exception of a piece of fruit, I can’t remember the last time I ate anything that wasn’t processed food, by these definitions. And I’m still alive, and in pretty darn good health.

If you want to point out that a certain food is unhealthy, like deep fried Coke (yes, that’s real), you need to do better than merely describing it as processed. Food processing is almost always a good thing, almost always healthy, almost always safer, and almost always necessary.

Adding unhealthy ingredients like fat and sugar are bad, but this is hardly what “processed” means. Some processed food is probably bad for you, but the process is not what made it bad.

Processed foods include pasteurized milk, a blended fruit smoothie, shrinkwrapped filet mignon, carbonated water, all beer and wine, and fried eggs.

Skeptics often point out fallacious behavior in others, and it’s easy to be “skeptical of

McDonald's" or "skeptical of processed food." Hold yourself to a higher standard. If you engage in skeptical outreach that includes pointing out the potential unhealthful effects of a certain food, don't fall into the trap of using a weasel word. If the food is high in trans-fats, say so. If it contains an unusually high amount of calories, say so. Merely dissing it by referring to it as "processed food" communicates nothing useful.