

Good Writing Practice

Syntactic punctuation distraction

Slash: usage and misusage

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Introduction

In research writing, non-distracting usage of the slash are (1) “per”, (2) semantic synonyms, (3) alternatives, and (4) possibly parts of a whole.

Non-distracting slash usage

(1) Per

Example

Moles/hr/skin

Notes

The most explicit and conventional usage of the slash is to symbolise the mathematical-like prepositional meaning of *per* as in a numerator-to-denominator relation.

(2) Semantic Synonyms

Example

Solidus/virgule

Notes

Each term on either side of the slash is acknowledged to be an equivalent of the other. Being equivalent to the equal sign, the slash is often applied when the nomenclature is undecided for a recently identified entity.

(3) Alternatives

Example

And/or

Notes

The protein occurs in the cytoplasm and/or the nucleus vs. the wordy: the protein occurs in the cytoplasm, the nucleus, or both.



(4) Parts of a whole

Example

0.5 M NaOH/0.5 M NaCl

Notes

The slash denotes the presence of NaCl in the solution, being equivalent to *and*, *containing*, or *plus*.

Slash misusage

In contrast to non-distracting slash usage, there are distracting examples of slash misusage: (5) contrasting abstractions, (6) inexplicit coordinating conjunction *and*, and (7) inexplicit inclusive conjunction *or*.

(5) Contrasting Abstractions

Example

(Results section: results statement)
A venous/arterial concentration difference was observed for plasma free fatty acids.

Revision

A venous-to-arterial concentration difference was observed for plasma free fatty acids.

Notes

The contrasting *to* meaning, as in *cell/cell interaction*, effectively conveys a tangible physical relation. But in the example, this meaning is

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inexplicit when the contrasting constituents are intangible as in *venous/arterial*. In the Revision, the athwart (i.e., on both sides) hyphenated “to” is explicit.

(6) Inexplicit coordinating conjunction “and”

Example

(Methods section)

At each physician appointment, blood/urine tests were performed.

Revision

At each physician appointment, a blood and a urine test were performed.

Notes

In the example, it is confusing whether there is more than one test for blood and for urine. The coordinating conjunction *and* is clearer by focusing on individuality. Furthermore, the repeated *a* avoids the unintended plural meaning *tests*.

(7) Inexplicit inclusive conjunction “or”

Example

(Introduction section: research objective)

In this study, the Tinto model and other derived models are reviewed to understand freshman persistence/exit from two-year colleges.

Revision

In this study, the Tinto model and other derived models are reviewed to understand freshman persistence or exit from two-year colleges.

Notes

This usage of the slash is intended to convey that instances of *persistence* and *exit* each occur, but as alternatives. However, the relation between opposite alternatives is confusing, compared with slash demarcation of synonyms, justifying usage of the inclusive coordinating conjunction *or*. A frequent example of the inclusive *or* is when a moderator of a meeting asks the attendees whether there are any questions or comments. The moderator is not saying an attendee can only ask a question or state a comment (the exclusive *or*) for which *either ... or* would be explicit.